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ABSTRACT

This study examined what faculty, alumni, and current students at Boise State University (BSU) in Idaho thought about the core curriculum and how well it met stated goals. On addition, comparisons are offered between BSU students and students at a sample of other four-year institutions. Faculty, alumni, and student surveys were conducted in 1996 and 1997. The study found that faculty were generally positive about the core curriculum, with only 10 percent indicating that the core was a waste of time. Nearly 70 percent of recent alumni indicated that the core courses they took were valuable beyond college. Both faculty and alumni agreed that the core was best at providing introductions to content outside their major subject areas, and was least helpful in giving students a better understanding of the issues involved in citizenship. Nearly two-thirds of alumni thought that the core courses helped them to develop their critical thinking skills. About half of BSU undergraduates thought the core helped them become more independent and self-directed learners and to think about their majors in the context of a larger world view. Responses, overall, differed little from the responses of students at other institutions across the country. (MDM)

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What Faculty, Students and Alumni Think About The General Education Core

Research Report 98-02

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Abstract
What Faculty, Students, and Alumni Think about The General Education Core

The requirement that students complete a certain number of courses within the general education core has reportedly been a cause of student dissatisfaction, especially among those who see the goal of college simply as preparing for a career. Core also has been an obvious place to look when faculty are seeking to increase the number of credits required within a major without increasing the total number of credits for graduation.

This report seeks to provide a perspective on what faculty, alumni and current students think about the core curriculum and how well core is meeting its stated goals. In addition, comparisons are offered between Boise State University students and students at a sampling of other four-year institutions. Findings include:

- Faculty generally are positive about the core. Only 10% agreed the core was largely a waste of time.

- Almost 70% of recent alumni agreed that the core courses they took were valuable beyond college.

- Faculty and alumni agreed that the core was best at providing introductions to content outside their major subject areas.

- Core courses were least helpful in giving students a better understanding of the issues involved in citizenship, both faculty and alumni agreed.

- About two-thirds of alumni thought that core courses helped them develop their critical thinking skills.

- Only about half of current undergraduates thought the core helped them become more independent and self-directed learners or to think about their majors in the context of a larger world view.

- Responses from a sample of BSU undergraduates differed very little from students at other four-year institutions across the country.

Findings generally indicated that the core curriculum could be improved in meeting goals other than the delivery of subject matter. Last approved in 1980, these goals include critical thinking, preparation to learn independently, skills and perspective to live better lives, increased recognition and tolerance of diverse perspectives, more comfort with change and how to adapt, and citizenship issues. The General Education Core Curriculum Committee is currently updating the wording of the outcomes and goals associated with core and will be addressing other issues shortly.

What Faculty, Students and Alumni Think About The General Education Core

General education core requirements bear the brunt of much criticism. Students supposedly find the requirements "useless" and an impediment to graduation (see the December 10, 1997 *Arbiter* for a recent example of this point of view). Faculty, at least those who teach in professional areas with heavy requirements for their majors, also reportedly think that core requirements should be eliminated or at least pared down to make more room for requirements within the major.

Core requirements, however, have traditionally been an essential part of a curriculum designed to produce well-educated graduates. Having knowledge in a variety of fields included in core is thought to lead to a well-educated human being who can think critically, see the world through a more diverse lens, and function more fully as a citizen in the democratic process.

This brief report provides a perspective from faculty, alumni and current students on what they think about the core curriculum. In addition, it offers comparison data with students who completed the same items at other four-year institutions across the country. The faculty data were gathered in the Spring of 1996 as part of a larger study on what faculty, students, and the community thought were important outcomes for graduates. Student perspectives were gathered during the summer of 1997 as part of a larger survey of graduates from 1994-95 and 1995-96. A second student survey developed by ACT was given to students enrolled in a random sample of undergraduate classes in the Spring of 1996. National comparison data provided by ACT were based on students who took the survey at 95 colleges across the country between January 1993 and August 1996.

Findings

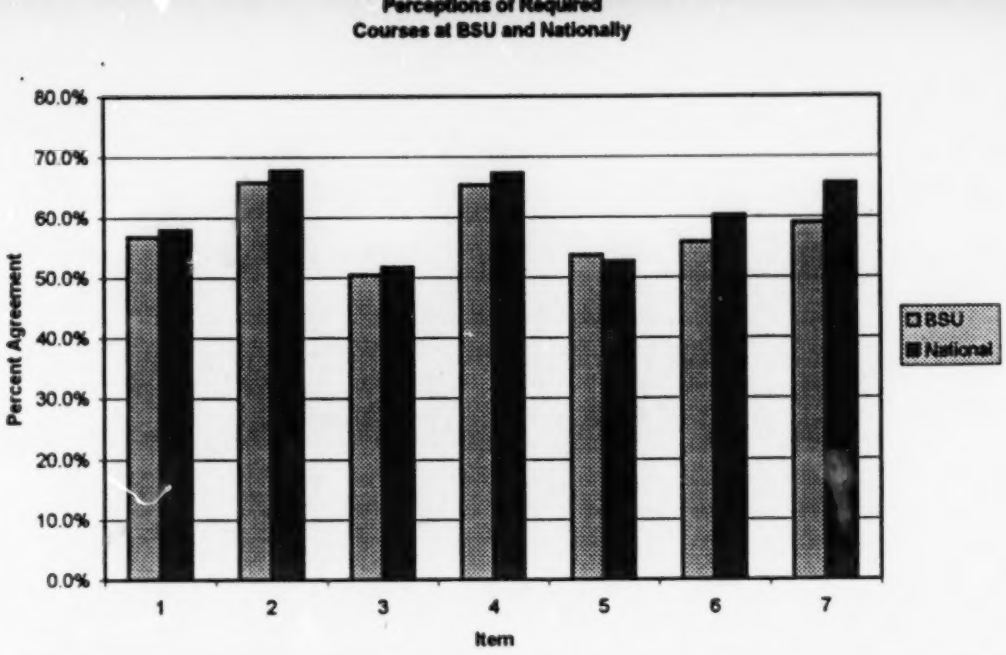
Generally, faculty were fairly positive about the current general education core requirements. As shown by table 1, only about 10% thought the core was largely a waste of time. They were most certain that the core helps students understand content areas outside their major (86% agreement). They were least certain that the core helps give students a broader grasp of issues

involved in citizenship (63% agreement). In addition, using an analysis of variance procedure, it was found that faculty did not differ significantly by college on any of the six items. This indicates fairly uniform perceptions of core by faculty, whatever subject area taught.

Though not as positive as faculty about the value of the general education core, BSU graduates pretty much agreed that the core had the same strengths and weaknesses (see table 2). They were most likely to agree (84%) that the core provided them with good introductions to the subject areas. Just like faculty, graduates were least likely to agree (40%) that the core helped them recognize the choices and responsibilities of involved citizenship. The other two weakest areas, graduates thought, were the outcomes of helping students become more comfortable with change and how to adapt to it (49% agreement) and providing skills and perspectives that helped students live their lives better (52% agreement).

The ACT survey asked somewhat different questions and thus somewhat different results were obtained. As shown by table 3, BSU students were most likely to agree that taking required courses outside their area of specialization helped them to broaden their awareness of diversity among people, their values and cultures (66% agreement) and to build a framework to organize their learning within and across areas of study (64% agreement). BSU students were least likely to agree that core courses helped them become more independent and self-directed learners (50.5% agreement) and to think about their majors in the context of a larger world view (54% agreement).

These findings were similar to those obtained nationally. As shown by Figure 1 below and Table 3, BSU results typically differed by 1-3% from national data. The area of greatest difference was in developing an appreciation of great works of literature, philosophy, and art (59% vs. 66%).



Item 1: Develop as a "whole person"
Item 2: Broaden my awareness of diversity among people their values and cultures
Item 3: Become a more independent and self-directed learner
Item 4: Build a framework to organize my learning within and across areas of study
Item 5: Think about my major in the context of a larger world view
Item 6: Increase knowledge of the earth and its physical and biological resources
Item 7: Appreciate great works of literature, philosophy, and art

Figure 1.

In general, then, both faculty and students found that teaching (and learning) subject matter content was the easiest outcome to attain. This is probably because most faculty think that imparting information about the subject is their main objective in teaching the course. Less tangible goals such as training better citizens and benefiting students in their personal lives were viewed as more difficult to attain because they are undoubtedly less directly addressed in the classroom. Yet items on the BSU graduate survey were taken directly from statements developed on the purpose and goals of core in 1980 and still in effect today. Thus, these results indicate a gap exists between what BSU hopes to promote through its general education core and what faculty and alumni perceive has occurred.

The good news is that the negative image of general education core thought to exist was generally lacking from both the faculty and student perspective. The data, however, also showed broad room for improvement. Currently, the core curriculum committee is working on updating a

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statement of mission and outcomes expected from core. When linked with an assessment process that focuses on outcomes beyond the transmittal of subject matter, the result may be changes in the perceptions of both students and faculty on what the value of the general education core is.

Table 1
Faculty Responses[1] to Items Related to the General Education Core

General Education (Core) requirements at this university:					
Item:	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
Are largely a waste of time	0.8%	10.7%	11.6%	45.5%	31.4%
Help students understand content areas outside their majors	25.8%	60.0%	6.7%	6.%	0.8%
Develop students' skills in English math, social sciences, natural sciences and humanities	21.7%	53.3%	12.5%	10.8%	1.7%
Benefit students in their personal & professional lives	25.6%	47.1%	19.0%	6.6%	1.7%
Give students a broader grasp of issues involved in citizenship	25.6%	37.2%	25.6%	7.4%	4.1%
Help students to understand ways of thinking and studying in areas outside their major	30.0%	45.8%	12.5%	10.8%	0.8%

[1] Based on responses from 121 faculty who were randomly selected from all full-time faculty. About 65% of those surveyed responded.

Table 2
Alumni Responses[2] to Items Related to the General Education Core

In general, the courses I took to fulfill the University Core requirements in areas I, II, and III:					
Item:	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
Provided me with good introductions to the subject areas	24.1%	59.9%	12.1%	3.1%	0.8%
Helped me understand assumptions made and methods used in the various disciplines	14.0%	54.7%	24.0%	6.4%	0.9%
Developed my critical thinking skills	18.8%	46.7%	24.7%	8.1%	1.8%
Helped me understand different approaches to knowledge	21.2%	49.2%	22.2%	6.6%	0.8%
Prepared me to learn independently	20.4%	42.5%	26.0%	9.0%	2.1%
Provided skills and perspectives that help me to live my life better	16.3%	36.2%	32.3%	11.6%	3.6%
Helped me recognize and tolerate diverse perspectives and opinions	18.4%	43.6%	27.4%	8.8%	1.7%
Made me more comfortable with change and how to adapt to it	12.7%	35.9%	35.5%	13.5%	2.4%
Helped me recognize the choices and responsibilities of involved citizenship	8.4%	31.1%	40.8%	15.1%	4.6%
Were valuable beyond college	24.5%	44.8%	20.0%	6.8%	3.9%

[2] Based on responses from 1,145 alumni who graduated in 1994-95 and 1995-96 (or 35% of those surveyed).

Table 3
Perceptions of Required Courses Outside the Major
BSU Students and a National Sample[3]

Required courses outside my area of specialization helped me...					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Develop as a "whole person"					
BSU	18.1%	38.7%	26.7%	10.8%	5.7%
National	16.9%	41.0%	28.5%	9.8%	3.8%
Broaden my awareness of diversity among people, their values and cultures					
BSU	20.6%	45.3%	22.9%	7.3%	3.8%
National	21.4%	46.4%	21.8%	7.3%	3.1%
Become a more independent and self-directed learner					
BSU	17.4%	33.2%	29.7%	13.6%	6.1%
National	15.9%	35.8%	29.9%	12.6%	5.8%
Build a framework to organize my learning within and across areas of study					
BSU	22.7%	41.5%	21.4%	8.4%	6.0%
National	22.5%	44.8%	21.9%	7.6%	3.3%
Think about my major in the context of a larger world view					
BSU	14.9%	38.7%	30.3%	10.6%	5.4%
National	13.5%	39.2%	31.7%	11.3%	4.3%
Increase my knowledge of the earth and its physical and biological resources					
BSU	13.7%	42.2%	30.3%	9.2%	4.6%
National	15.2%	44.9%	29.1%	7.8%	2.9%
Appreciate great works of literature, philosophy, and art					
BSU	21.4%	37.5%	26.1%	9.6%	5.3%
National	23.8%	41.9%	22.9%	7.9%	3.6%

[3] Based on responses from a random sample of 720 BSU students and a national group of 34,599 four-year college students who completed the ACT College Outcomes Survey.

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